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Behind the Politics of a Current Brouhaha in Iran: an Ex-President Ayatollah's Daughter and the Baha'is

by WAHID AZAL

> ...By the time that Iranians were getting ready to tear down the very foundation of Qajar monarchy in the course of the Constitutional Revolution...[during 1905-09; the son of the founder of Baha'ism, 'Abdu'l-Baha] officially sided with Muhammad Ali Shah...and went even further and was knighted by George V, and under the British mandate established the center of his vanity in Haifa...
>
> — Hamid Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology*, 2008, 83.
>
> ...I fully support a first strike on Iran's nuclear facilities

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> wherever they may be hidden and by whatever means are needed to destroy them. If the Iranians deny us their oil, destroy their oil facilities – if we can't have their oil, neither will they… Regime change (one way or another) is coming in the relatively near future and Baha'is must be there when a new regime is established to make their mark on the new government and help move it in genuinely new directions…
>
> — Ian Kluge, Canadian Baha'i scholar, public list: talisman9@yahoogroups.com, April 15, 2006.

The Nature of the Controversy

For the past two weeks a scandal has been raging inside Iran centring on Faezah Hashemi, 54, former parliamentarian and daughter of former president, billionaire power broker and Assembly of Experts member Ayatollah ʿAli Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani. Appearing to be part of an escalating power struggle developing between the two blocs of so-called moderate-reformists (who recently took the *majlis* and Assembly of Experts elections) and their 'principalist' (i.e. hardliner) opponents; assorted principalist publications as well as leading figures in the Islamic Republic of Iran have gone on the attack denouncing her and her father alike for being traitors to Islam and

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the Revolution. Not losing a moment's opportunity to exploit the situation, and with all the typical warped exaggeration and blatant misinformation of neo-colonialist perception management regarding Iran's apparently 'abysmal' human rights record in relation to the Baha'i minority; the Western corporate media (and particularly the Persian language sections of the BBC and the VOA) have launched a veritable blitz campaign around the story not too dissimilar to what we have seen before.

The controversy surrounds Faezah Hashemi's publicized house visit to temporarily paroled Baha'i leader Fariba Kamalabadi, 52, with whom she apparently shared a prison cell in 2009 when Hashemi herself was briefly imprisoned following the post-election fracas of the Green uprising. One year before those events, in 2008 Fariba Kamalabadi, along with six other Baha'i colleagues of the seven-man *ad hoc* Iranian Baha'i administration known as the *hayat-i-Yaran* ('the Council of Friends', henceforth '*Yaran*'), was tried on charges of espionage and spying for Israel, found guilty and sentenced to ten years imprisonment. What has particularly raised the ire of some principalists in Iran is the group photograph of the house visit published in social media afterwards by the Baha'is which shows Faezah Hashemi with Fariba Kamalabadi seated among a group of other middle-class Baha'is somewhere in Tehran –- with the women

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DAVE WELS

all notably unveiled — with a picture of the Baha'i patriarch ʿAbbas Effendi ʿAbdu'l-Baha (d. 1921) prominently displayed on the wall to the left of the assembled party. The story with its photo(s) immediately went viral on social media, precipitating a huge uproar throughout the Iranian establishment.

While a seemingly innocuous gesture to most foreign observers not informed of bigger pictures, such an act under the Islamic Republic of Iran, and especially one undertaken by a daughter of such a prominent, high profile figure as Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, albeit symbolic, yet for all the wrong reasons, constitutes an unambiguously subversive act of outright sedition against the entire ideological edifice of the present system in Iran. Given its nature, and especially since the Baha'i question has consistently been a successful disinfo propaganda talking point for Western establishments to exploit and bludgeon Iran with for thirty-seven years; this act by Faezah Hashemi can also be interpreted as playing by design right into the hands of Iran's enemies in the West, and particularly the 'regime changers' and their agendas. More alarmingly, it may also be signalling that some sort of alignment is possibly forming between the moderate-reformist bloc, the Baha'is and the 'regime changers' abroad.

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Publicly in word, at least, Ayatollah Hashemi-Rafsanjani distanced himself from his daughter's actions while simultaneously denouncing Baha'ism itself as well. Yet, arguably, such a high profile and politically charged undertaking by Faezah Hashemi would not have been possible without either some kind of foreknowledge or complaisance, whether by her father personally and/or the power bloc behind him, because the entire gesture reeks of wider political manoeuvrings, and not just in Iran. As such characterizing the situation as merely a "debate about religion," as the *New York Times* has put it [1], is not only simplistic but grossly inaccurate, not to mention being the usual smokescreens and sleights of hand well known as being choice discursive gimmicks of false narrative building and disinfo propaganda engaged in by the Western corporate media, its agenda setters and the Western imperial human rights industry.

There is a complicated and tumultuous history behind all of this that, while located in Iran's religious history during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, also holds explicit geopolitical dimensions which involves Iran's bitter encounter with the forces of Western imperialism, colonialism and Zionism in the region, and, above all, with all of those trojan horse, native informers inside Iran as well as abroad who have consistently undermined the Islamic Republic of Iran since 1979 –- and even well before. The Baha'is are indeed one

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of the more prominent among such groups of native informers. But let us be precise here as to who it is we are actually talking about.

Haifan Bahaism

At issue is the Haifan Baha'i organization[2]: the uber-wealthy, well organized and corporate-driven majoritarian Baha'i sect loyal to the Baha'i 'Universal House of Justice' headquartered on Mt Carmel, Haifa, Israel, since there also exist other schismatic Baha'i groups who are not loyal to Haifa but stand in opposition to it (and who themselves have faced persecution by the majoritarian Haifan Baha'is, viz. the so-called 'Covenant Breaker' Baha'is) — groups which the Islamic Republic of Iran has little to no interest in [3]. This last point alone complicates –- even outright negates — the whole Western human rights narrative surrounding the apparent persecution of the Baha'is in Iran and shifts all of its discursive registers into other, more sinister contexts entirely. As an example of what is being pointed out here, the quote above by prominent Canadian Baha'i scholar Ian Kluge should give pause to any neutral observer as to the underlying political motivations of the Haifan Baha'i establishment towards Iran.

Now, contextualized by a few Western social scientists under the

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rubric of an NRM (New Religious Movement, which is to say, a 'cult') rather than, technically speaking, a 'world religion' [4]; the origins of Bahaism are to be found during the mid nineteenth century within a violent schism of the Babi movement that occurred in the territories of the Ottoman empire [5]. During that period, and while in exile after earlier being expelled from Iran during the early 1850s; the founder of Baha'ism, Mirza Husayn ʿAli Nuri *Baha'u'llah* (the Glory of God) (d. 1892), broke with his younger step-brother, the appointed supreme pontiff of the Babi movement, Mirza Yahya Nuri *Subh-i-Azal* (the Dawn of Pre-Eternity) (d. 1912), and proclaimed himself to be the universal messiah and penultimate divine messenger (or 'manifestation of God' in Baha'i technical language) come to establish a new global religious order that is to eventually succeed and supplant all religions and belief systems throughout the world. As a consequence of this violent schism, which included murders and assassinations by the Baha'is against their rival detractors among the Azali Babis, the Ottomans banished Baha'u'llah and his partisans to Acre in Palestine while Subh-i-Azal and a handful of his followers were sent over to Cyprus. Later on, the Azali Babis and Baha'is would stand at opposite poles of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905-09, with the Azali Babis not only supporting but at the forefront driving the people's revolution while

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the Baha'is instead stood with the forces of the royalist reaction and the revolution's Tsarist Russian-sponsored violent suppression by Muhammad ʿAli Shah Qajar (d. 1925) [6].

During the ministry of Baha'u'llah's son and successor, ʿAbbas Effendi *ʿAbdu'l-Baha* (the Servant of Glory) (1892-1921), further schisms took shape inside Baha'u'llah's own household with additional schisms developing after the deaths of ʿAbdu'l-Baha in 1921 and that of his grandson and successor Shoghi Effendi (d. 1957), who appointed no formal successor. Since 1963 the dominant Haifan sect has been ruled by the all male, nine-man body oligarchy (no women are allowed), viz. the Universal House of Justice. While some recent scholarship in Iran demonstrates that as early as the mid 1850s close contacts and linkages were already being actively forged between Baha'u'llah and agents of Western imperialism in the region, such as Manekji Limji Hataria (d. 1890) and Mirza Malkum Khan (d. 1908); it was under ʿAbdu'l-Baha specifically that these relationships and contacts were openly formalized and strategically solidified, particularly with the British and then the Americans. Close contacts with Tsarist Russia had likewise existed since the early 1850s, only to be interrupted by the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. Notably in 1891, and only one year before his death, Baha'u'llah was actively corresponding with Baron Nathan de Rothschild (d. 1942), and in so

doing openly forming an alliance with the European proto-Zionist movement that was to be officially launched only a few years later in 1897 in Basle, Switzerland [7].

ʿAbdu'l-Baha himself became a key figure in the British war effort against the Ottomans in Palestine during World War I, and in 1919 he was officially knighted by the recently established British Mandate for Palestine for his "...valuable services rendered to the British government in the early days of the occupation" [8]. Concurrently during the time when ʿAbdu'l-Baha was cooperating with the British war effort and then soon thereafter being knighted by them, in Iran itself the British had engineered a genocidal famine which, according to historian Mohammad Gholi Majd [9], had wiped out between eight to eleven million Iranians in only two years. Some recent sources even suggest an instrumental Baha'i hand in the rise of Reza Shah (d. 1944) and the establishment of the Pahlavi monarchy. The role of the British in bringing Reza Shah to power in 1921 is already widely known, with the Baha'is here being one of the British empire's trusted agents locally facilitating his rise through the devices of the Indian Parsi agent and head of British secret intelligence in Iran, Sir Ardeshir Reporter (d. 1933), who would have acted as the go between.

Under the Pahlavis the Haifan Baha'is thrived economically as well as

politically in Iran, enjoying enormous perks and privileges with the elite of that regime. Following the August 1953 *coup d'etat* against Mossadegh, for example, industrialist and business tycoon Habib Sabet (d. 1990) –- a lifelong member of the Iranian Baha'i leadership until the eve of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 –- was awarded the Pepsi Cola and Iranian Radio & Television franchises by Muhammad-Reza Shah Pahlavi (d. 1980) for his role in supporting the Shah during that crisis. Additionally, the father of Prime Minister Amir Abbas Hoveyda (d. 1979) had been a lifelong Baha'i who had even acted for some time in the official capacity of a personal secretary to ʿAbdul-Baha in Palestine — Amir Abbas Hoveyda himself being a Freemason. The Shah's personal physician, General ʿAbdu'l-Karim Ayadi (d. 1978), a long time royal court insider and crony to his twin sister Ashraf Pahlavi (d. 2016), was a Baha'i. The notorious Sangsari criminal warlord and underworld figure, Hozhabr Yazdani (d. 2010), was a Baha'i. Parviz Sabeti, the deputy-head of SAVAK –- being the man credited for much of the violent excesses committed by that state security organization against the Shah's opposition throughout the 1960s and 1970s -– was a Baha'i (albeit the Baha'i establishment vehemently denies the fact at present). Countless other examples such as this could be furnished from that era. So given this, the Haifan Baha'is obviously occupied a privileged

place as a pillar of the Pahlavi *ancien régime* as they arguably remain to the Empire's anti-Iran initiatives presently.

Be that as it may, technically speaking, the Islamic Republic of Iran, while it does not constitutionally recognize or accord legitimacy to Bahaism as a creed, has no state sponsored policy of persecuting Bahaism either. Baha'is as Iranian citizens are legally accorded full citizenship rights under the law in Iran. It is their creed (together with its organization and activities) which is not recognized, or granted legal privileges, and not their rights as citizens per se. This fact is consistently misrepresented, confused or totally glossed over in silence in the West. Nevertheless, besides the fact that at all stages of its history Bahaism has been consistently sponsored and supported by the forces of Anglo-European imperialism and colonialism against the interests and security of Iran; the issues the Islamic Republic of Iran currently has with the activities of Bahaism have to do primarily with the reality that the Haifan Baha'i organization and its leadership have consistently enjoyed a tightly knit relationship with the state of Israel, its establishment and state apparatus. The Israeli establishment, quite literally, has gone out of its way to protect the Baha'is since 1948 and in turn the Baha'is themselves have been one of the biggest beneficiaries of the Zionist state. The reader is invited to Google pictures of their Baha'i World Centre in Haifa to see for

themselves the kind of allowances the Israeli state has made to this organization in the construction of their megalomaniacal Hanging Gardens of Babylon on Mt Carmel. Independent Israeli filmmaker Naama Pyritz even confessed during her 2004 interview of Frederick Glaysher what she believed to be the Haifan Baha'i organization's inordinately 'special relationship' with the Israeli state (as well as with the United States and Great Britain): a special relationship which no other community or organization in Israel presently enjoys [10].

As such, given the history here, together with the central, overriding fact that its very world headquarters is located in Israel, the activities of the Haifan Baha'i organization demonstrably pose a serious national security threat to the Islamic Republic of Iran in a similar fashion as various radical Islamist terrorist groups or violent irredentists (such as the Basque separatists and similar) would theoretically pose national security threats to Western governments and their internal national security interests. It should be noted as well that France banned Scientology and proscribes its activities by law, and to some extent Germany as well; and so, the situation of the Haifan Baha'i organization in Iran is legally similar to the situation of Scientology or, say, the Jehovah's Witnesses in France and Germany. In Germany, for instance, they are not even registered as a religious

organization but as an NGO.

The Western media often likes to blow the Baha'i issue in Iran beyond all reasonable proportions while conveniently remaining silent or otherwise downplaying similar parallels existing in Western countries. Almost nothing is mentioned by them about Baha'isms sordid history or eyebrow raising linkages and connections presently. This is precisely because these Western establishments are engaging in carefully orchestrated neo-colonial perception management, consensus building and so information war against Iran due to the fact that the Haifan Baha'is have in fact been their dependable comprador lackeys and trojan horse in the region – and so, native informers — for the good part of one-hundred and sixty-six years.

The *Yaran*, Faezah Hashemi and the Converging Forces of Destabilization in Iran

Now, the *Yaran* referred to above had initially been allowed to operate in Iran by the government of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005). But a series of incidents during the period of his presidency involving corruption, profiteering, the establishment of illegal front companies, *hawala* networks and illicit property speculation as well as overall activities deemed to be threats to Iran's

national security committed by Baha'is; where ostensibly the openness of the Khatami years was being systematically abused by the *Yaran* and its cronies; convinced the succeeding Ahmadinejad administration (2005-13) to instead shut it down altogether, arrest and charge its seven-man membership, initiate proceedings against it in the judiciary which finally culminated in the 2008 sentence against the body. One sticking point of the case was the active Baha'i missionary and mass conversion efforts underway during the *Yaran*'s tenure (which the *Yaran* had earlier made written guarantees and explicit undertakings to the Iranian government not to do), especially on Iranian university campuses, which the Iranian judiciary determined in its 2008 verdict to be a subversive recruitment effort in collusion with foreign powers, notably Israel and the United States.

With that said, Faezah Hashemi's key involvement with the Iranian Green movement during 2009; that this movement was a linchpin for a specifically Western coordinated regime change operation in Iran; together with the persistent allegations that the Baha'is themselves were heavily involved in it; transforms the nature, configuration and registries of the entire discussion and locates it elsewhere besides questions revolving around religious freedoms or minority rights in Iran. That quote above from Canadian Baha'i scholar Ian Kluge says it all, so for Faezah Hashemi to be openly cavorting this closely in

public with a temporarily paroled leader and representative of the Haifan Baha'i organization in Iran says that the concerns of her principalist rivals are not entirely off the wall or misplaced, nor are they remotely predicated by merely base sentiments of religious bigotry either.

Be that as it may, the Iranian judiciary has called for Hashemi's appearance over the incident. But given who her father is, and the muscle he wields within the system (after all, in 1989 following the death of the Ayatollah Khomeini, Hashemi-Rafsanjani was the proverbial king-maker), it is unlikely that much, if anything, will be done to muzzle her. Nevertheless that certain forces may be in the process of converging that include the Haifan Baha'is, foreign based regime-changers, the Rafsanjani family and the moderate-reformist bloc should give serious concern to any genuine well wisher of Iran because it signals that even though we have a nuclear accord and sanctions have theoretically been lifted on Iran as of February 2016, something dastardly may be afoot and of potentially far more menacing proportions than 2009. This, together with the Obama administration's duplicitous behaviour in dragging its foot on the unfreezing of nearly 2 billion dollars worth of Iranian assets while also strong arming both American and European business and finance from dealing with Iran, suggests it strongly. These

developments are indeed connected, and the Baha'i issue is being strategically used by the West and its internal Iranian allies as not only leverage against the Islamic Republic of Iran but as an outright weapon.

Notes

[1] http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/19/world/middleeast/iran-bahais-kamalabadi-hashemi-meeting.html (retrieved 20 May 2016).

[2] Originally http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php/Baha'i_Faith; now https://www.scribd.com/doc/235458694/Baha-i-Faith-SourceWatch (retrieved 20 May 2016); see as well, William M. Miller *The Baha'i Faith: Its History and Teachings*, Pasadena, 1974, and Francesco Ficicchia *Baha'i: Einheitsreligion und globale Theokratie. Ein kritischer Einblick in die Universalreligion*, Münster, 2009.

[3] http://www.thesectsofbahais.com/ (retrieved 20 May 2016); see also http://www.orthodoxbahai.com/ and http://www.bupc.org/ as well as Frederick Glaysher's two websites https://www.fglaysher.com/bahaicensorship/ and http://www.reformbahai.org/ (retrieved 21 May 2016); also more recently, Shua Ullah Behai and (ed.) Eric Stetson *A Lost History of the Baha'i Faith: The Progressive Tradition of Baha'u'llah's Forgotten Family*, Newark, 2014, and the two blogs

and website associated with this specific faction http://www.unitarianbahai.org/, http://www.abdulbahasfamily.org/ and https://historyofbahaifaith.wordpress.com/ (retrieved 21 May 2016).

[4] See Denis MacEoin's entry "Baha'ism" in *A Handbook of Living Religions*, (ed.) John R. Hinnells, London, 1984, and (writing under the alias Daniel Easterman) *New Jerusalems: Reflections on Islam, Fundamentalism and the Rushdie Affair*, London, 1993; see as well Juan R.I. Cole "*The Baha'i Faith in America as Panopticon*," originally published in The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, vol. 37, no. 2 (June 1998): 234-248; digitally republished on his website http://www-personal.umich.edu/~jrcole/bahai/1999/jssr/bhjssr.htm (retrieved 21 May 2016).

[5] See my "*Invoking the Seven Worlds: An acrostic prayer by Mīrzā Yaḥyā Nūrī Ṣubḥ-i-Azal*," in LUVAH: Journal of the Creative Imagination, Summer 2013, 1-37 (defunct), now here https://www.scribd.com/doc/269786896/Invoking-the-Seven-Worlds-An-acrostic-prayer-by-M%C4%ABrz%C4%81-Ya%E1%B8%A5y%C4%81-N%C5%ABr%C4%AB-%E1%B9%A2ub%E1%B8%A5-i-Azal and here https://www.academia.edu/3588368/Invoking_the_Seven_Worlds_An_acrostic_prayer_by_M

%C4%ABrz%C4%81_Ya%E1%B8%A5y%C4%81_N%C5%ABr%C4%AB_%E1%B9%A2ub%E1%B8%A5-i-Azal (retrieved 21 May 2016); see also the website http://www.bayanic.com (retrieved 21 May 2016); and especially, the works of British orientalist E.G. Browne and the French diplomat A.-L.-M. Nicolas.

[6] See Siyyid Miqdad Nabavi Razavi's seminally important *Tarikh-i-Maktum: nigahi bi-talash-ha'i siyasi-i-fa"alan azali dar mukhalifat ba ḥukumat-i-qajār va tadaruk-i-inqilab-i-mashrutih* (Concealed History: An investigation into the role of Azali activists in opposition to the Qājār regime and the genesis of the Constitutional Revolution), Tehran, 2014.

[7] Cited in Moshe Sharon (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem), "*Jewish Conversions to the Baha'i Faith*," online http://www.hum.huji.ac.il/english/units.php?cat=3666&incat=3479 and http://bahai-library.com/sharon_jewish_conversion_bahai and http://bahai-library.com/sharon_jewish_conversion_bahai (retrieved 22 May 2016).

[8] *The Handbook of Palestine*, (ed.) Harry Charles Luke, *et al.*, London, 1922, 59; online at https://archive.org/details/handbookofpalest00lukeuoft and https://www.scribd.com

/doc/283090248/Handbook-of-Palestine-1922 (retrieved 21 May 2016).

[9] See Mohammad Gholi Majd *The Great Famine and Genocide in Iran: 1917-19*, Second Edition, Lanham, 2013.

[10] https://www.fglaysher.com/bahaicensorship/archives/Bahais_in_My_Backyard%20-%202.wmv from 3:40 and https://youtu.be/g2-oGfP2PbU?list=PLkL0BhAsTueiLqVCFxoLLR_mgM4TCcZSm from 4:20 (retrieved 21 May 2016); see also the 2007 documentary film '*Baha'is In My Backyard*,' online at https://vimeo.com/22467795 (retrieved 21 May 2016).

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